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SUBJECT: LESOTHO: NEW COMMUNICATIONS MINISTER ASKS FOR HELP

REF: MASERU 225 AND PREVIOUS

MASERU 00000246 001.2 OF 002

11. SUMMARY: In an April 20 meeting with U.S. Ambassador June Carter Perry, Lesotho's new Minister of Communications Mothetjoa Metsing acknowledged the failure of the GOL and the governing party to properly communicate with Lesotho's public and asked the U.S. Embassy in Maseru for assistance. Under pressure due to the continuing political turbulence in Lesotho (REFTEL), Minister Metsing stated that "without good messaging, the government is under siege." Embassy Maseru is exploring ways to help the Minister in identifying concepts for strategic communications strategies that will contribute to the stability and political maturity of the Mountain Kingdom, as well as emphasize USG foreign assistance contributions. END SUMMARY.

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Realizing the Importance of Communication  
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12. On April 20, 2007, U.S. Ambassador June Carter Perry, Minister of Communications Mothetjoa Metsing, Deputy Principal Secretary of Communications Thabiso Makintane, and Poloff (note

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taker) met at the Ministry of Communications at the Minister's invitation. Minister Metsing opened the meeting by acknowledging the inadequacy of the communications strategies of the GOL and the governing party. "We in the government are weak in the areas of responding and informing," stated Minister Metsing. Borrowing USG terminology, he remarked that great improvements were needed in the GOL's "public diplomacy."

13. Minister Metsing noted that "without good messaging, the government is under siege." He then observed that less developed countries, when under siege, tend to "resort to undemocratic means." Lesotho would be greatly criticized if it closed certain opposition-leaning radio stations, stated Minister Metsing, but the GOL would be under pressure to do so without its own effective messaging. The Minister then emphasized his belief in both a strong government and a strong opposition, noting the GOL must engage the public at all levels on issues of wide concern. In particular, he mentioned the need to combat xenophobia through engaging the public on the benefits of relations and cooperation with other nations.

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USG Advice, and a Request for Help  
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14. Ambassador Perry, using examples from U.S. institutions, discussed how the creation of media strategy plans and making senior government officials accessible to the public helps the USG remain in touch with the American population. She also discussed the need to involve citizens in government initiatives and the desirability of creating a central system for feedback from voters. Citing her personal experience in the private sector media, Ambassador Perry offered views on the cadre of information professionals in the United States and what made them successful.

15. Minister Metsing asked the Ambassador for help in developing the GOL's communications strategy. Pointing to the U.S.'s experience in this field, he explained that this help is necessary as improved communications will bring much needed accountability to the GOL. He offered that the GOL would release a report on its accomplishments during the first 100 days of its new tenure in office, and there would soon be a regularized announcement of cabinet decisions. However, he continued to hold out the possibility that the USG might offer some help to the GOL in the communications sphere. (NOTE: At a World TB Day event one week earlier, DCM has encouraged Minister Metsing, as GOL spokesman, to give regular press briefings. Metsing stated his desire to do so, and his intent to highlight USG initiatives that bring benefit to Lesotho in the areas of HIV/AIDS, economic development, and trade diversification. END NOTE.)

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Admitting That You Have a  
Problem is Step One...

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16. COMMENT: Embassy Maseru is now exploring various options to help Minister Metsing's communications efforts. As it would be inappropriate for the USG to provide direct support to Lesotho's governing party in the midst of the continuing review of opposition parties' complaints, some of which are pending court decisions, we are exploring the possibility that a U.S. academic institution could be interested in assisting the GOL. We also may purchase books on strategic communication which we can pass on to the Minister. Regardless of the final shape that this cooperation takes, the fact that the GOL has realized the vital necessity of communicating with its citizens - and the recognition of its past failures - is an important step. END COMMENT.  
PERRY